

THE LAST WORD

By Shawn Reilly Simmons

A bad review isn't the only thing that's come between two old friends from culinary school.

James knew the exact table Simon would choose, the two-top in front of the picture window farthest from the door. He always sat there so the draft wouldn't cool down his meal before he could finish it, even though James had installed a heater at the entrance to keep out the cold that tried to weave its way across the floor into his restaurant. The thermostat was set at a perfect seventy-two, the ambient air providing comfort and the ideal environment for both entrees and desserts to maintain their integrity for up to seven minutes after they left the service window.

James knew how Simon thought. He knew he preferred Osetra caviar over Beluga, remarking more than once in their twenty-year friendship the nuttier flavor of Osetra was far superior to the more pedestrian version. He knew what Simon was going to say before the words ever left his mouth. At least he thought he did.

Friendship. Friends. He supposed that was how he'd describe his and Simon's decades-long trajectory in life. They'd been classmates first at culinary school, then colleagues working the line in a busy restaurant in the city. They had become competitors, then rivals, and now they'd entered their first phase of imbalance, where their paths were not mirroring each other and career comparisons could not be drawn.

James opened the smoker and removed the shucked oysters just as the pressure of the air inside the restaurant shifted as the front door swooshed open and closed.

Simon stood near the entrance, hesitantly looking around the empty dining room. James emerged from the kitchen, the smoked oysters wedged into a bed of rock salt, candied lemon peel and lavender sprigs garnishing the edges of the plate.

"Lock the door, would you?" James said.

Simon hesitated a moment then turned to twist the lock on the front door. James set the oysters down in the center of Simon's table, then motioned for him to take a seat.

“Where is everyone?” Simon asked, stepping lightly toward the table.

“Tonight is a special occasion, a private meal between old friends,” James said when Simon didn’t immediately take a seat.

“Jimmy, what is this?” Simon asked with a small laugh. He eyed the oysters with admiration and a touch of hunger and longing.

James pulled out one of the chairs and sat down. “I have questions. I thought we could have a private chat.”

Simon sighed and joined James at the table, clearing his throat. “Look, I know my review wasn’t—”

“Accurate?” James said.

“My reviews are always fair, Jimmy,” Simon said. James slid an oyster onto the plate in front of Simon and chose one for himself. “I’m sorry about the star. I didn’t think—”

“You didn’t think a pan in the *New York Review of Restaurants* would cost me my Michelin Star?”

“No, I didn’t,” Simon said quietly, dropping his eyes to the oyster.

“Eat,” James said. “Please.”

Simon hesitated a second, then gave in and picked up the shell, slurping down the oyster whole. His cheeks, reddened by either the wind outside or the liquor James could smell from across the table, shuddered with pleasure as he swallowed it down. He immediately reached for another.

“Maybe Gladys leaving you has colored your view of the world,” James said.

Simon snorted a laugh without taking his eyes from the platter on the table.

“I told you . . . nothing happened between me and Gladys,” James said.

Simon closed his eyes as he savored the second oyster. He began shaking his head before he opened them again. “No, Jimmy, the review had nothing to do with Gladys, or what might or might not have happened between the two of you,” he finally said. “Good riddance to that bitch.”

James sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. “I didn’t encourage her. When she showed up on my doorstep . . . she said some things. Things that reminded me of another time long ago.”

Simon waved a hand in the air. “Water under the bridge, Jimmy boy. Old shriveled up, useless water. And I didn’t tell her a thing.”

James stood up from the table and headed to the kitchen. “Do me a favor and open the 2010 Rothschild.”

“What’s the occasion?” Simon said, hurrying up from his seat.

“I told you. A celebration of our long friendship,” James said, pushing through the doorway into the kitchen.

Simon found the bottle behind the bar and opened it, savoring the aroma of the wine that he felt was peaking on that very day, in the middle of New York City after its long journey from Bordeaux nine years earlier. Tasting what was inside would be a privilege, something unique only a select few in the world would experience.

James returned after a few minutes with two plates of perfectly seared duck breast topped with sage-infused blackberry glaze atop whipped potatoes that had been subtly kissed by caramelized onions.

“This is all very familiar,” Simon said as he eyed the dish in front of him. He swirled his wine and watched the legs glide down the glass. “This is the same meal I reviewed.”

“I thought I might convince you of its beauty the second time around,” James said, retaking his seat.

“What is the goal?” Simon asked, squinting at him. “For me to retract my review? I’m sorry, old friend, but I’m afraid that’s not how it’s done. It’s out there forever at this point.”

“Do you have any idea of my monthly expenses here?” James asked. He picked up his knife and fork and began carving into the breast on his plate.

Simon took in his surroundings, the floor-to-ceiling window that looked out over Bleecker Street, the exposed brick walls, the modern tables and chairs, the sleek mahogany bar, fully stocked with top-shelf bottles of liquor and the finest bottles of wine from around the world.

“I have no idea,” Simon said with a shrug.

“More than you can imagine, my friend,” James said. He took another bite of duck and chewed thoughtfully. “I lost another investor today. The restaurant expansion won’t be happening.”

Simon dug into his plate as well, surprised at how sublime the duck tasted, how complex the flavors were on his palate, how the feeling of pleasure lingered there after he swallowed.

“Look, Jimmy,” Simon said after a sigh and a sip of wine. “I regret now that what I wrote has had an impact on your career. It was meant as constructive criticism.”

James set down his fork and laced his fingers. “Interesting. I hadn’t thought of it quite that way. It took years for me to earn a Michelin Star. Years. Getting my second was just as important as my first. Now I’m back down to one. Bookings have fallen off.”

Simon’s cheeks reddened slightly, but he recovered and took another sip of wine. “Jimmy, it was my first cover review. I couldn’t let our personal history color my critique of the place. You

know that.”

“Our personal history is the topic at hand,” James said. “As you said, you’re having the same meal you had that night. What is your review?”

“It’s incredible,” Simon said quietly. “It wasn’t that night.”

“I find that hard to believe,” James said.

Simon faltered, then brought his eyes back into focus. “Let’s have dessert then. I might be persuaded to pitch a follow-up piece. Maybe a feature story on your career.”

James’s lips twisted into a smile. “A puff piece?”

“A puff pastry piece, perhaps,” Simon said with a chortle.

James considered him a moment before rising and heading to the kitchen once again.

A young couple stopped near the front window and peered inside at the nearly empty restaurant. The woman turned and gave the man a lingering kiss. He looped his arm around her waist and urged her to continue down the sidewalk.

James reappeared with two small chocolate domes, the dark chocolate ganache on top shining like a mirror.

“What did Gladys say?” Simon asked as he poured more wine into his glass. “When you saw her last.”

“She said you were cruel,” James said with a small shrug. “That you’re a monster.”

Simon seethed in silence, then sipped his wine testily. “She was the most insufferable woman. And why would she talk about it anyway? She left me. And came straight to you.” He dangled a spoon over the chocolate dome, mesmerized by his reflection.

“After what happened with Sarah back in culinary school, I thought you’d have learned how to be a decent gentleman,” James said, sitting back in his chair.

“What happened to Sarah was not my fault,” Simon said evenly. “She misunderstood me.”

James set his elbows on the table and leaned forward. “Sarah committed suicide after you went to the dean, telling the lies you carelessly let fall from your lips. You had a hand in what happened to her, might as well have fed her those pills yourself.”

“It was her or me,” Simon said. “I couldn’t afford to get expelled.”

“She didn’t cheat on that test. She’d never plagiarize a recipe and turn it in as her own. You set her up,” James said. “You forced yourself on her that night and when she said she was going to report you to the dean . . .”

“And you knew about everything, and did nothing about it,” Simon countered, waving the spoon in front of his face. “Sarah was

going to tell everyone that I'd raped her? No, I don't think so." Simon shook his head and scooped another bite of his dessert.

"Retract your review. Or I'll tell a story of my own. Highlights will be how you've abused and assaulted not one but two women in your lifetime, at least. I saw the bruises on both of them. Witnessed the devastation you've left behind."

"Why would you do that?" Simon scoffed. He looked around the restaurant and then back at his friend. "All of this would be gone. Believe me, old chum, I'll take you all the way down with me."

"I should've said something back then. You're right about that," James said. "But now it's time to set things right. For both of us."

Simon took a bite and closed his eyes once again. "Okay, I get it. I'll see what I can do at the magazine, okay? I promise."

James leaned back in his chair and considered his friend of twenty years.

Simon looked up at him, his eyes glassy. "You know what? You've convinced me to retract my review with this meal," he said, his words soft at the edges. "I'll sell it to my editor. We'll both be okay, old friend."

"I thought I might be able to convince you," James said with a quick flash of a grin. "But there's no need to talk to the editor. This morning, I mailed off a full accounting of what happened between you and Sarah all those years ago back in school. About how I covered for you and lied to the dean, backed up your story."

Simon's mouth fell open, then snapped closed, his eyes beginning to water.

"I sent some pictures of Gladys, too. One of the ring of bruises around her arm from where you grabbed her before she came here, and her bruised cheekbone. I'd finally gotten her to quit sobbing. She was traumatized by you, unsure where else to go. I think your bosses at the magazine will be very interested in all of that."

Simon looked at him with a flash of alarm. "Why? We had it all worked out . . ." Simon's voice faded as he lost his breath and his chin slumped onto his chest. He took a few more breaths then became still, a bluish tint to his cheeks. James reached over and took a spoonful of Simon's dessert, leaving the one in front of himself untouched. He wanted whoever found them to witness his final act of culinary perfection.

He picked up his wine glass and tasted the Bordeaux for the first, and the last, time, rolling the wine across his tongue, trying to imagine the fentanyl mixing with the wine, unable to taste it. The nine-year-old cork had allowed the syringe to slide in without

resistance, and that was the final sign he'd needed to set things right. For both of them.

The long sleep was on the way, his final performance completed.

